

c2\plans

Wednesday, March 29, 1989

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Memoirs and supposedly candid interviews by retired officials long after the events demonstrate both gaps, concealments and deliberate lies, sometimes even after documentation giving the lie to earlier cover stories has become available.

An example this year is continued denial by McNamara and McGeorge Bundy that serious planning for the possible invasion of Cuba was underway in October 1962 prior to the discovery of the Soviet missiles, although documentation of this was first published in 1987 and much more has now become available. Their comment on the plans that have been revealed is that this was "routine contingency planning," a description that I do not believe they can regard as truthful. Am. Hqs

These plans, almost unprecedentedly, were directed and monitored by the President and the SecDef, aiming at a date for maximum readiness just three weeks away, giving rise to prepositioning of fuel and ammunition and force movements. There was probably no other case of such a planning "exercise" under Kennedy, except during the Missile Crisis itself.

There again the President, from October 22 on, had made no decision, no firm commitment, beyond blockade; indeed, I now think it quite likely that he and McNamara regarded the preparations for airstrike and invasion as mainly and probably a bluff. But would they regard that planning as "routine contingency planning" (even allowing for the difference that it was carried out essentially openly, for purposes of threatening)? ✓
If either of these was "normal, routine, contingency" planning, what would non-routine, emergency, abnormal, "serious" planning be?

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Kwinty program, always deprecates the significance of planning activity that has been revealed, in this fashion. He emphasizes that the President has usually not made up his mind or committed himself, and even when he has, he may well change it. Therefore, he emphasizes, one cannot validly infer what the President was going to do, or even what he firmly intended, from planning activity: even in those rarer cases where the President himself is found to have directed that it be done and taken an ongoing interest in it (as in October 1962, both before and after 16 October).

It is true that the President can change a commitment, even at the last moment: an example is JFK's decision not to retaliate immediately when the U-2 was shot down. It is also true that even what appear to be highly urgent preparations may reflect intentions on the President's part other than a determination or even willingness to carry them out.

*last
wt.*

Wants (some) action

E.g., it may be part of a strategy of threatening or bluffing. Or he may be constructing an image, to a domestic audience or allies or adversaries, of readiness or willingness to do or to consider something: e.g., bold, violent, risky, brutal, illegal, unpopular, decisive action, or something he had promised to do or consider.

Both of these motives, I now suspect, were at work in the planning for escalation going on after October 22, much more than I or my colleagues, or the public and the Soviets and Cubans, believed at the time, or scholars have recognized since. On this point, McNamara's comments in 1987 on his inhibitions at the time against attacking the missiles or invading strike me as candid, and as real revelations. (To say this is to draw attention to the secrecy that surrounded such calculations and official attitudes at the time and for a quarter-century after, which has generally misled scholars and analysts and even, it appears, some former participants).

*against
interest*

He may, however, still underestimate the chance that under the pressure of events--as it was building and as they might have occurred--the President would have overridden his own and McNamara's inhibitions. Sorensen seems to make this point, plausibly; and it seems reflected, tacitly, in McNamara's own recollection of his fears on Saturday night, October 27, that he might never see another Saturday sunset.

To say this is to say that such plans and preparations do have,

indeed do create, some chance of being carried out, even when it is the President's firm intention not to do so. Even total bluffs may involve risks; and one of the risks is that they may not turn out to have been total bluffs after all.

The very preparations intended to make the bluff credible--perhaps to a variety of audiences--create expectations, responses and preparations in those audiences, and in others, that may undermine certain options and create pressures for others in ways that make it difficult or undesirable not to carry out the threat eventually.

+ responses
of opponents
+ allies

The President and his advisors are often, or should be, experienced and realistic enough to know that this is true. (That wisdom often shows up in the President's or an agency's great reluctance and resistance to allow certain "contingency" planning to go on at all, when they wish to minimize the likelihood that they will be pressed to carry out such plans).

Thus the existence of urgent contingency planning does have some special significance--especially when it has been explicitly authorised by the President--as an indication that the President is willing to consider a certain course and understands that there is some likelihood he may take it: indeed, that he is somewhat enlarging this likelihood by encouraging or permitting this planning to take place.

It may not be as strong an indicator of all this as an outsider would suppose, but it is more revealing of Presidential expectations and intent than Bundy wants to admit: given what seems to be his continued, (lifelong identity) of guarding Presidents from reproach.

This is why I take high-level discussion, involving the Secretaries of Defense or State or the President, of nuclear first-use, or even of the possible threat of it, with great seriousness. Bundy, on the contrary, consistently deprecates the significance of such "talk," having usually earlier denied that any such discussion even took place. When I pointed out to him this pattern of behavior, that seemed to me to exhibit a bias (of which the motive was not entirely clear to me), he denied it, claiming simply to call the shots as he saw them.

He could perhaps have defended such behavior--which complements the extreme and prolonged official secrecy protecting

such discussions--as averting an alarmist tendency to exaggerate and mistake the significance of such discussions in the mind of the President and as a basis for predictions.

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I think they also have good reason to fear correct inferences by the American public that such discussions indicate in American officials a readiness to use nuclear weapons--both diplomatically and in combat--and a likelihood that they will be used which may be

"small" but which is larger than those officials have often admitted, larger than the public has been led to believe, and much larger than most American citizens believe justified. To be concerned about this does not require ~~them~~ *to* mistake a "bluff" for a firm intent. *on a bluff*

In other words, if and when they are made aware of the actual content of the highly guarded secret discussions of nuclear threats and contingencies, the public is likely to guess, just as I do myself, that where there is this much of this kind of smoke, future nuclear fires are more possible than they would have liked to believe.

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c2\kschool
30 March 1989

Q: What can new studies of the Cuban Missile Crisis--and other nuclear crises--add to the studies of the Cuban and Berlin Crises being pursued by the Kennedy School? Why should their work be expected to be inadequate?

The Kennedy School acts much as if it were the RAND Corporation, and its studies tend to have the same flavor, and limitations. Though it does not do classified work (officially, so far as I know--though Dean Allison's one-day-a-week consultation for Secretary of Defense Weinberger must have been entirely classified) the output I have seen from the School does not differ from RAND's in reflecting an apparent concern to maintain the trust and good opinion of the White House and the Office of Secretary of Defense through successive administrations.

This concern for access, influence and a potentially intimate relationship with the Executive Branch isn't altogether bad--Rand does some good studies and has some useful influence, and so does the Kennedy School--but it does put limits on the questions that get raised, the sources of information used, the hypotheses examined and the standards of evidence and proof applied to various kinds of these, the kinds of understanding sought and the uses envisioned for these.

In the case of the output so far on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the transcripts of symposia and the Blight and Welch book (On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis, N.Y. 1989) present interesting material (in particular from the Soviet participants: this was a real breakthrough, well justifying the support from various sponsors).

Yet on the American side--with inputs drawn, characteristically, predominantly from former officials, and secondarily from analysts who have long relied on official access, consulting arrangements or research contracts--there are several rather glaring biases or systematic omissions, which relate to the observation above.

1) There is little evidence of an ability either in the participants or the interviewers and their commentary (neither Blight nor Welch fall in either of the categories above) to look either critically or realistically at US relations to Cuba in the early Sixties.

The focus on this dimension of the crisis by the Soviets is perhaps the most significant contribution of the Harvard Project to American discussion of the crisis. But none of the American participants rose to this challenge in the meetings so far reported

(the recent Moscow meeting may have been different in this respect).

The former officials continue, it appears, simply to conceal or to lie about major aspects of their own role, and the others seem to refrain from challenging these omissions and lies. The net findings, some of which are rather obviously false in the light of new evidence revealed by analysts outside the project, are reported as a new "lesson"--about Soviet "misperception" as a central basis for the crisis, along with US "unawareness" of the Soviet misperception--which seems probably to be unfounded and significantly misleading.

2. More generally, one finds in such Kennedy School products as the books by Blight and Welch and by Neustadt and May (Thinking in Time, N.Y. 1986) an evident unwillingness to criticize John F. Kennedy--or indeed, any recent American president--in any fundamental or challenging way, if at all. Conjectures and assertions about a president's point of view, aims, priorities, constraints, judgments, responses, proclivities are all compatible with the loyal, uncritical, trustworthy perspective of a President's Man.

That sets a good example, in a practical sense, for graduate students whose highest ambition is to become President's Men. But it is not an adequate basis for approaching an understanding of recent historical process, in an era when national interests, broadly or even narrowly conceived, have not always been well served by our presidents, or their advisors from Harvard.

9 april 1989

Scratchpad on Cuba II

Subjects of investigation:

--How high was the risk of war? Of nuclear war? What were the sources of risk? What possible moves, or developments, would have raised or lowered them? What might be "learned" that could help lower (or raise!) risks in future situations?

--What was the contribution of "psychological factors" to the development of a crisis, to the risks of war, to the resolution of the crisis?

--What was the role of "misperception," misunderstanding, miscalculation: by whom; of what; to what effect? How might these have been reduced; and to what effect?

--What was the role of "surprise"? Why were certain events surprising? What events remain puzzling, hard to "predict" or explain even today?

--Did lack of information or valid understanding lead to wrong or misleading or inadequate "lessons" at the time, or at various intervals afterwards? What effects did this "mislearning" have? Is there a pattern to it: e.g., biases explainable by interest, perspective?

--How reliable are the KSchool "lessons" proposed as of early 1987; or after interaction with the Soviets, late 1987d? E.g., in the light of the transcript of October 27 released after the Cambridge meeting, or the evidence on invasion plans presented by Hershberg in 1987 and 1989? Or in light of information in my possession not yet released? (which may be taken as a sample of the set of information not yet released, including full transcripts of the ExComm, Soviet thinking on Berlin and Germany, planning for MongOOSE, invasion, and the possibility of Soviet missiles...)

On the last point: The KSchool lessons seem wrong or misleading, both of the main ones: 1) that there was almost no chance of war or nuclear war, given the willingness of JFK to settle rather than attack, and the reluctance of JFK and McN to attack;

2) that the crisis arose primarily because of Soviet misperception, a mistaken belief in a high likelihood of imminent US invasion of Cuba; the US commitment--which contributed sharply to the danger of the Soviet move--reflected a "natural, understandable" failure to imagine that the Soviets might develop such a mistaken concern (or perhaps, to care that much about it), a failure to realize that US covert actions might contribute to such a mistaken expectation by the Soviets... [note: JFK was highly reluctant to give a no-invasion pledge even in the height of the crisis, or to stick to it afterwards! and with reason: of domestic politics]. Thus, better communication before the event, which might have led to more realistic appreciation of US motives by the Soviets, could have averted the crisis.

Both of these appear to be false: the latter, based on continued conscious deception by two of the main participants in the KSchool Study, McG and McN (McG being the one credited with encouraging the others to participate). The effect is to reduce a sense of urgency in the public about the risks of the nuclear era, and to distract it from forms of awareness and measures that might actually have averted the crisis and might reduce future risks.

These include: --(a) better "communication" between the US Government (and within it!) and the US public: about the realities of US actions (unveiling covert activities and their aims), US secret foreign policies, and the real appreciation by US officials of the strategic significance of various developments. (E.g., the judgments of McNamara and Taylor, and others, on the significance of the deployment--not different from Fulbright's in 1961!--as

distinct from the "insult," defiance of warning--whose legitimacy deserved reexamination in light of the real judgment on strategic significance--or involvement in "our" hemisphere).

--(b) reexamination and revision of our "two-tier" system of diplomacy, our double standards for acceptable behavior: our rejection of a legitimate "Soviet sphere," along with unawareness of our own effective maintenance of a comparable, global sphere; our failure to follow JFK's conscious precepts of looking at situations from Soviets' point of view--as if they were humans and politicians not unlike ourselves (like Shylock)--and avoiding humiliating their leaders. (What was needed was to understand how what we were doing might be humiliating or frightening to them; and to reexamine whether we needed to do that, in that way; to be able to foresee rageful or defensive reactions, or to understand them quickly when they arose, rather than to interpret them wrongly as aggressive initiatives).

Become ready to treat Soviets as a great power comparable to ourselves (while reexamining and modifying "great power" behavior and arrogance in ourselves, along with encouraging such change in the Soviets: as in our former imperial allies, France and Britain and Holland and Portugal). I.e., to accept diplomatic parity, as befitting a nation that had--in the eyes of JFK, McN, and McG (somewhat prematurely)--achieved nuclear parity, or could soon do so, if we challenged and pressed them to it (as I, and the Kennedy Administration, proceeded to do in 1961 and 1962).

This is still a controversial proposal: It is precisely what Kennan proposes in an OpEd piece in the NY Times today, April 9, 1989, while on front page it is revealed that the Bush administration has still not decided to meet the Gorbachev innovations in any strongly encouraging or supportive or bold way, limiting itself so far to proposing marginal steps they would like to see the Soviets take, with no mention whatever of US concessions or accompanying moves, let alone of bold new joint policies.

The US government still prefers to act on the notion that what seem identical actions are to be judged differently for us or the Soviets because we are defending a status quo and they are trying to change it in pursuit of world domination by any means (we are the good guys, standing for....etc., while they are the focus of evil...).

As Brzezinski said at the height of the Cuban Crisis (in the New Republic, issue of November 3, 1962: i.e., appearing before the resolution of the crisis on October 28):

"It is still uncertain whether our action was timely enough to forestall a significant nuclear threat to us, capable of altering the present strategic balance. Because we are the status quo power, we cannot afford a strategic parity and must always

strive for both nuclear and strategic superiority. The automatic and fashionable equivalents of our bases and their simply ignores the intellectually more difficult problem of assessing who is trying to expand and who is primarily favoring the status quo." (p. 8. Did Brzezinski really find that last problem "difficult" in his own eyes?)

This last lesson is not, I believe, mentioned at all in the KSchool conclusions. On the issue--raised here by Brzezinski--of the actual relation of the strategic balance to the occurrence and resolution of the crisis, and the risks of various US policies, the KSchool account does present differing views among its former-official participants, without taking sides.

What it does not do is present any real critique of the views of either faction. This needs doing. As I see it, each of the participants they quote--in both of the two main groups into which they divide--combines certain realistic, shrewd judgements, and valid criticisms of the other school, with other assertions that are almost moronic in their logical inconsistency or their departure from experience (as their opponents--but rarely the KSchool commentators--sometimes accurately note).

A striking defect of all the output of the Kennedy School on the subject of the Cuban Crisis is its failure to regard the question of why John F. Kennedy chose to respond to the Soviet deployment as belligerently as he did as being at least as problematic as the question of why Khrushchev chose to deploy the missiles at all, or in the way he did.

Where the latter question is subject to elaborate speculation, leading to the unchallenged assertions by several former officials that they found it, in early 1987, just as confounding as they did 25 years earlier, the former is treated by these same officials as almost self-evident, again without great challenge from others. The only real controversy acknowledged at the time, one that still persists, concerned why JFK did not react more aggressively initially, whether he was right not to do so, and whether or not he should have moved, or was about to move, to direct attack if Khrushchev had not, unexpectedly, ended the crisis by reversing his deployment.

In reality, as I learned in 1964, the initial reactions of some of these same officials were quite contrary to what they led the Kennedy School researchers to believe in 1987: without much effort, or much probing by the researchers. They saw US options initially quite differently from the President, in his initial reaction, though they quickly adjusted to his viewpoint; so it is the President's personal reaction--not that of his bureaucracy, or the zeitgeist--which shaped later events, which was itself not easily predictable (even by his close subordinates, any more than

by the Soviets), and which needs to be explained, understood...and perhaps guarded against, in future.

(It was not just the Soviets who failed to foresee, "The President will have no choice but to go to war, if necessary, in order to reverse this policy without any American concession." His main cabinet and sub-cabinet officials failed to see it that way either, or to foresee, before hearing him, that he would see it that way. It seems hard to "blame" the Soviets for not predicting what Nitze, Rusk, Ball, McNamara and the Chairman of the JCS, General Taylor, all either failed to predict in the President's initial perception of the challenge or failed to agree with ("At the least we'll have to strike the missiles; we have no choice; they must go, even if we have to go to war...").

(What did get the President off this, and when? Did the ExComm process contribute; or was it enough to cool off and reflect, for a few hours or a day or so? Would not McNamara have calmed him down, in a "normal" crisis consultation between President and Secretary of Defense? Did RFK ever disagree with JFK in these early days--turning against the airstrike before JFK did (the President had to appear receptive to it, up to October 21, to avert revolt in the JCS, perhaps below Taylor's level)--or did RFK act in the meetings for JFK at every point?)

(Though Nitze initially rejected both airstrike and invasion in favor of accepting the missiles, he did come to prefer blockade followed by airstrike, a course he had not initially considered. Contrary to his traditional patron Acheson, he found this better than an unannounced airstrike, in terms of allied support in Latin America and Europe. This may be where Dillon came out, too.)

What is really problematic is not only the consensus for a selective blockade, versus peaceful diplomacy, but the amount of support for an unannounced airstrike, initially by the President and then (after he cooled off) by a number of civilian officials: a genuinely crazy and crazily dangerous proposal, which, by all accounts, might well have been adopted.

[Recall that this proposal was for an initiating act of violence by a major power that was without any even remote precedent since the end of World War II. (The only precedent even by a minor power--almost universally defined as "aggression"--I can think of was the North Korean attack in June, 1950. Perhaps the French shelling of Haiphong in November, 1946?) This was before the Tonkin Gulf "reprisals" or the Rolling Thunder air campaign--both of which may, indeed, have been stimulated by the planning during the Cuban Crisis just two years earlier, by the same officials--or the Israeli attack on the Iraq reactor, or Reagan's airstrikes against Libya or his invasion of Grenada. (No Soviet equivalent comes to mind: though Reagan portrayed the Soviet shootdown of KAL-007 as aggressive, to enormous effect!)).

This is not why it was crazy; it was crazy for many other reasons. But the lack of precedent makes it all the more problematic why this nutty, awful idea came so quickly to the minds of such intelligent, responsible people and why it persisted as long as it did.]

Why have these questions not yet been explored? It may be that what is needed is an investigation by researchers not committed to avoiding hypotheses, evidence, inferences, that raise damaging questions or suggest critical appraisals of the judgements and performance of the president in office at the time.

There are advantages to research on the Cuban Missile Crisis being conducted by the John F. Kennedy School of Government: for example, the ease of assembling a panel of former Kennedy officials, like Bundy or McNamara, for discussion. But there are also disadvantages. They are comparable to those that might arise in relying on the Ronald Reagan School of Government to learn lessons from the invasion of Grenada or the bombing of Tripoli, or the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Government for "critical history" of the Vietnam War. It happens there are no such Schools; in fact, there is no other School at Harvard that bears the name of an individual, reflecting the generous founding grants and the prospects of further financial support by the wealthy family of a prestigious "favorite son" of the University. That this puts some constraint on research sponsored by such an institution is not an unreasonable hypothesis, though it will be resented; and it fits the results rather well, quite possibly much better than the founding family ever intended or the researchers themselves are consciously aware.

If there is a published sentence by a member of the Kennedy School faculty or research team that is even mildly critical of a decision, characteristic, attitude or belief of John F. Kennedy--in a way that goes beyond his own occasional, measured self-criticism--I have yet to see it. That suggests a self-censorship--probably mostly, perhaps entirely, unconscious--that cannot fail to cripple an effort at "critical history."

My own aim is lesson-learning for the future, not critical evaluation of past officials. To weigh such officials in the balance, to "grade" them, let alone to condemn them, is not the object of the research I am proposing here; such judgements are not to be part of the end-product, nor are they even clearly necessary to the research process.

But valid, reliable lessons for the future cannot be expected from an investigation that is tacitly constrained to avoid, to ward off, to refute, possible critical appraisals of particular officials who were central to the historical process being studied,

or of the past performance of institutions--like the White House or Office of Secretary of Defense--that are looked to as current or future sources of information, sponsorship, or influential and prestigious consulting relationships.

Likewise, however useful their testimony may be, one cannot rely on lessons to be learned from former officials whose misunderstanding, at the time, of the global situation, of the nature and impact of their own government's activities and of their adversaries and rivals, shaped the surprises and the official responses that gave rise to the crisis: and who have been defending themselves ever since against accusatory inferences about the occurrence of the crisis, their performance in it and the risks it posed.

That is all the more true when surprise and puzzlement in the public and among researchers reflected, in part, misstatements, misleading silence or misdirection by these particular officials: who are still repeating or covering up these past deceptions, rather than correcting them and explaining or apologising for them.

Both of these drawbacks apply to the testimony of Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, two of the principal participants in the KSchool research. It is not that such witnesses were, relative to their colleagues, peculiarly unwise or culpable: on the contrary, in this case. Nor that they are incapable of learning, and of passing on useful lessons from what is, after all, unusual and esoteric experience.

It is just that what they have to say--given their past history of secrecy, lies, and intense personal involvement in and responsibility for dangerous crises that were not avoided--bears an unusual burden of proof, deserves skeptical and penetrating examination, before it is relied on as a basis for averting future risks, which is their own avowed aim.